1: Cohen E-4,5 (1956-1965) 1967 MS14 Kanuri MS14

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The Family and Household in Bornu

AFTER SUMMARIZING the historical background and the setting of Kanuri life, I can now proceed to analyze the society as a working, on-going whole, in other words as a process. Anthropologists generally do this by dividing the society up into what they consider to be its most significant parts. They then describe each part and try to show how these parts are related to one another, and to the functioning of a whole society. The manner in which such an analysis proceeds—what is left out, what is included, and what comes first or last—is the product of the author's "functional theory" of the society, his idea of how it works.

For Kanuri society I have chosen to start with kinship and the household as the first parts of the whole to be described and understood. First, the household is where the Kanuri themselves begin to learn of their own society and how they must act to become full-fledged participants. Secondly these parts, especially that of the household, form the basic units of Kanuri social structure such that almost all other social life in Bornu can be analyzed and understood once these particular parts are described. To start with a description of any other part of the society such as the economic or the political organization would require explanations and references to family and household life in order to make the material understandable to the reader. It is better to start the analysis at this point—that of kinship and household—then proceed to build up a picture of the society having first looked at what I consider to be its crucible, the kinship system, and its cornerstone, the household.

The Kinship System

The kinship system of any society involves three categories of behavior that may overlap one another but are always different from each other. They are as follows:

(a) Genealogical relations—the links between individuals which are based upon biological reproduction.

(b) Descent relations—the links between individuals which are based upon

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the allocation of members in a genealogy to a socially and culturally recognized kin group. This may include the same persons as a genealogical group, or it may include only part of them.

(c) Affinal relations—the links between individuals which are based upon marriage through the socially recognized union of a husband and wife.

The Kanuri separate genealogical relations from those of descent just as we do by speaking of distant relations. They have a special word for such people, although many younger people today do not use it, and simply describe such people as "distant" or "far away" in the same way that Kano is far away from Maiduguri. The traditional word refers to a vine that grows around a household wall and then continues to reach out and grow on the walls of adjoining households. However the vines all stem from one root, just as an expanded genealogical tree can be viewed as coming from one man and his wife or wives. These distant kin do not attend one another's family ceremonies or send gifts on important occasions. Indeed their whereabouts are often not very well known to the person speaking of them. Many Kanuri can give quite a large number of such kin especially in their parents' generation, their own, and that of their children. On the other hand, like Americans, they find it difficult to remember relatives back beyond their grandparents even though there is a special kinship term for great-grandparents, and only a few people can name the brothers and sisters of their grandparents. Exceptions to this occur in increasing degree as families become more and more aristocratic. Such families retain the memory of important male ancestors in their genealogy much further back than do ordinary people; indeed they often maintain special persons to keep the memory alive.

Set into the genealogy of any Kanuri individual is his own descent group. In anthropological jargon—used because once understood, it is technically efficient —this group is reckoned cognatically with an agnatic emphasis. That is to say, Kanuri descent groups are based upon an individual's relation to persons through both his father and mother (cognatic relationships); and a person feels equally related to all of his four grandparents. However there is an emphasis placed upon those related to a person through males only (agnatic or patrilineal descent) for a number of important activities. The father's cognatic descent group is called the family of the blood, and the mother's cognatic group is the family of the milk, while the word "family" (*dur*) refers to both father's and mother's side of the family. Other evidence for the cognatic quality can be seen in the words used for various relatives in the descent group. There are no distinctions between mother's side and father's side in the terms for great-grandparent and grandparent, and although there are significant differences in the terms used to refer to relatives of the parent's generation level, cousins on both mother's and father's sides can be lumped under one term, which is the same as the one used to refer to a brother or a sister. On the other hand, there are differences between the mother's and the father's side which we refer to as an agnatic emphasis.

This emphasis can be easily seen in inheritance and when a man goes to court. The Kanuri follow Islamic inheritance law in which men receive two portions to every one given to a woman. Thus it is twice as important to be related to your father as your mother, if everything else is equal, such as the amount of wealth to be inherited and so on. These rules of inheritance are followed very closely in